

CHAPTER IV.

Courtship and marriage.

A salient feature in the social life of all Chaco tribes, and one in which they differ considerably from the tribes whom I learned to know in tropical South America, is the great sexual liberty allowed to young people before marriage. As soon as a girl has passed her first menstruation she is considered free to choose for herself occasional lovers, and generally she does not delay in making use of this right. This free sexual life is particularly indulged in during the algaroba season, in connection with the feasts and dances which then take place. The girls avoid the natural consequences of this sexual license by abortion or infanticide, customs which are also approved by the social morality of the Chaco Indians. Having enjoyed this free life for some years, the girl ultimately decides to marry, and then as a rule becomes a faithful wife as long as the husband does not himself neglect his duties towards her. This general state of things is met with all along the Pilcomayo, although customs of course differ to some extent in different tribes. I shall first relate the customs practised among the Choroti in courtship and marriage. M
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The *Choroti* are a strictly monogamous people. During my stay among the different Choroti tribes I never found a single case of polygamy, and I was moreover able to confirm that polygamy is strongly disapproved of by custom and the social morality of the people. It is first of all rendered impossible by the jealousy of the women who, as I have mentioned before, have a decisive influence in matters of love and take the first step towards contracting marriage. M
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Courtship therefore among the Choroti assumes rather a peculiar form, inasmuch as the girls play the active, and the young men the passive part. Marriages are as a rule contracted during the algaroba season from November to March, when there is a good supply of food in the villages and C
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584 the Indians live a happy and joyous life. We may therefore say that this is the proper «pairing-season» of the Chaco tribes, and particularly of the Choroti. At other times of the year, when fruit becomes scarce and life to the Indians is often a hard struggle for existence, they are little inclined for merry-making, love, and marriage. In October, when the very nutritive chañar fruit ripens, the Chaco Indian is, as it were, revived, and a few weeks later, when the algaroba and the tusca trees give their much appreciated fruit, his life is at its gayest, manifesting itself of course in his sexual interests also. Those young men and women who want to be married then wander about from one village to the other, where dances take place. In each village three dances, those called *Jóhlöki*, *Ahlénta*, and *Arúshe*, are performed on four successive evenings. Free sexual intercourse is connected with these dances, and the girls play an important rôle in them although they do not actively take part in the entertainment. The dances of the Chaco Indians are mainly entertainments of the men. The girls generally content themselves with merely looking at the dancing youths, making their choice among them. Incidentally however a girl may be seen dancing for a while behind a man whom she particularly likes with her hands laid upon his shoulders, and after the dance she takes him away and keeps him for that night. This is something one may notice after each dance, and thus the Choroti dances during the «season» often have the character of real sexual orgies. The last *Arúshe*-dance on the fourth evening is, however, supposed to be decisive as far as marriage is concerned; those girls who have found the men whom they want to marry then keep them not only for the night, but for ever. The young man is taken to the village and house of the girl, where he stays as her husband, becoming a member of his wife's family.

584 The *Arúshe* may therefore be called the proper courtship and marriage dance of the Choroti. The very name of the dance is interesting from this point of view. The Choroti word *arúshe* means 'vulture' — not the black vulture, but another kind common in the Chaco¹⁾ — and the name therefore may be translated as «the Vulture-dances». The idea of the Indians seems to be that just as the vultures jump and dance round their prey, the dead animal, so the Choroti men in the *Arúshe* dance jump round the girls trying to «conquer» them. The girls at this dance, it should be understood, stand within the ring formed by the dancing men. All the young men who take part in the dance are dressed in their best clothes

¹⁾ *Polyborus vulgaris*.

and ornaments, wearing many-coloured mantles, necklaces, ear-tubes, big ostrich plumes on the head, and having the face painted. The men form a circle round the girls with arms interlaced round each others' waists. The dance chiefly consists in jumping with both feet at once and stamping hard upon the ground to the measure of a very noisy but monotonous chant. The ceremony is called *nissammaha aséhne*, «to hurry on the girls». The expression «to hurry on» (*nissammaha*), as we shall find later, is used by the Chaco Indians in many cases where there is a question of magically influencing the course of nature for good and useful ends. Just as the Indians believe they can hurry on or promote the growth of the fruit by influencing the tree spirits and by exorcising the evil demons who are trying to blight them, so they «hurry on» the girls in the sense that by the dancing and chanting the latter are prompted to make a definitive choice of a husband, whereas at the same time evil spirits are kept away from them. Courtship and marriage, it should be noted, are of those numerous critical occasions in human life when malignant supernatural powers are believed to be more than otherwise on the alert to do harm, and spoil the good designs of men, and as usual the weaker sex is supposed to be particularly exposed to them. The courting dance *Avúshe* is thus in part held with the intention of keeping off this invisible molestation, so that the girl's choice of a consort for life may take place under good auspices.

A man who is not taken away from the dance by a girl has no possibility of getting either a temporary paramour or a wife. The matter wholly depends on the girls, and there are of course always men who for one reason or another are despised. I sometimes noticed such unfortunate lovers at the Choroti dances. Their experience had led them not to take part in the dances; they were sitting in a hut close by, eagerly shaking the rattle gourd (*pelite*), as they said, «to hurry on the girls» and thus possibly to have better luck in the future. Since the women are much fewer in number than the men, it is necessary that some men are obliged to remain bachelors all their lives. These men were ridiculed not only by the women but also by their more fortunate brethren. On the other hand, there are no unmarried women, and even widows soon remarry unless they are very old.

The men may try to attract the girls at the dances by their beautiful ostrich plumes, necklaces, and other ornaments, but these means of attraction certainly only play a subordinate part. The Choroti woman evidently expects something more of a man whom she thinks of marrying

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581 or whom she only wants for a temporary lover. Above all she wants as a
 584 husband a man who treats her well and possesses the qualities necessary
 to support the future family. Since the Choroti to a great extent live by
 fishing, skill in this art is naturally reckoned among a man's most praise-
 worthy qualities. Importance is also attached to skill in gardening and
 hunting. Consequently, when a young man is courting a girl, he tries to
 gain her favour by presenting her with fish in abundance. I was told that
 when several men are courting the same girl — which naturally is often
 the case — the man who brought her the largest quantities of fish had the
 greatest chance of gaining preference.

Thus among the Choroti, marriage is from a man's point of view an
 important matter. When the parents send out their young son to take
 part in the dances and to find a wife, they follow his undertaking with
 the keenest interest. Every evening the father shakes his magical rattle
 gourd (*pelite*) in order to promote his son's enterprise and «hurry on» the
 girls on his behalf. When the rattle gourd is used for such practical
 purposes the ceremony is called *nekeñlitse simā*, which literally means:
 «to shake the rattle to get (or obtain) something».

Apart from these ceremonies in connection with courtship, there are
 no particular marriage rites, except the necessary drinking-bout which
 accompanies all family feasts and in which only the men take part. The
 young couple are without any further ceremony regarded as married, but
 marriage is not fully complete until a child is born.

Among the *Mataco*, marriages are not particularly contracted in con-
 nection with the dances, but conditions are the same as among the Choroti
 in so far as the women play the active part both as concerns incidental
 amorous relations and marriages proper. The great drinking-feasts dur-
 ing the algaroba season are the occasions when a woman enters into tem-
 porary or permanent relation with a man. When the men are intox-
 icated, the girls avail themselves of the opportunity, seize the youths whom
 they like by the hands and take them to their houses where they spend
 the night with them. These liaisons lead in many cases to real marriages.
 When marriage is agreed upon, it is celebrated with the usual ceremonies
 which have a religious significance. The drum, the most important mag-
 ical instrument of the *Mataco*, is beaten the whole night with a view to
 keeping off evil spirits from the couple. Similarly, a ceremonial dance,
 called *Nahutsak*, is performed in the evening. It is a ring-dance much like
 the marriage dance *Avushe* of the Choroti. The couple being married are
 seated in the middle of the ring and their friends dance and chant around